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**“But no one told me it’s okay to not drink”: A qualitative study of young people who drink little or no alcohol.**

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Accepted for publication in Journal of Substance Use 2012(pre-print version)  
Published on line 6<sup>th</sup> May 2013

**Abstract**

Young people’s drinking is a matter of social, media and political concern and the focus of much policy activity within the UK. Little consideration has been given to the fact that some young people choose to drink little or not all and our knowledge and understanding of their choices and how they manage not drinking is limited. Nor has much attention been paid to the possibility that the insights of young light and non-drinkers could be useful when thinking about how to change the prevailing drinking culture, but if we are to gauge and engage with the current culture of consumption then we need to understand all parts of it (Pattenden et al., 2008). This qualitative study of young people (aged 16-25) who drink little or no alcohol aimed to further understanding of their lives and choices. The results highlight that choosing not to drink or drink lightly is a positive choice made for diverse reasons with the strongest messages and influences coming from real life observations. Young people develop strategies to manage not drinking or drinking lightly. Alcohol education messages need to present not drinking as a valid option to young people, parents and society more broadly.

Key words (3) young people; alcohol abstinence, qualitative

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## **Introduction**

Young people’s drinking is a matter of social, media and political concern and the focus of much policy activity within the UK. Little consideration has been given to the fact that some young people choose to drink little or not at all and our knowledge and understanding of their choices and how they manage not drinking is limited. Nor has much attention been paid to the possibility that the insights of young light and non-drinkers could be useful when thinking about how to change the prevailing drinking culture, but if we are to gauge and engage with the current culture of consumption then we need to understand all parts of it (Pattenden et al., 2008). This paper presents the results of a qualitative study of 52 young people (aged 16-25) living in the UK who drink little or no alcohol, which aimed to further understanding of the lives and choices of these young people and to identify ways to support their choices.

Within the UK context, a key policy concern is that drinking to get drunk has become the predominant drinking culture amongst young people. This pattern of drinking heavily over a short period is often referred to as ‘binge drinking’<sup>1</sup> and is associated with a range of harms to individuals (e.g. accidents, ill health) and also to the wider community (e.g. crime and disorder). The focus of research has been on documenting and understanding the predominant drinking culture (e.g. Measham, 2006, Coleman and Cater, 2007; Szmigin et al., 2008, Seaman and Ikegwuonu, 2010, Percy et al., 2011). Research has highlighted that, for most young people, drinking and getting drunk is primarily about pleasure - having fun, going out with friends, taking time out of everyday life and harm is rarely considered as an outcome (indeed some harms are viewed as part of the experience) (Szmigin et al., 2008; Measham, 2006; Mayock, 2004; Sheehan and Ridge, 2001; Harnett et al., 2000).

However, evidence from qualitative studies suggests that young people’s drinking is much more nuanced: it depends upon context and drinking patterns and reflects family background, life stage, previous experiences with alcohol and socio-economic circumstances (Harnett et al., 2000; Piacentini and Banister, 2006; Bradby, 2007; Mullen et al., 2007; Seaman and Ikegwuonu, 2010). Recent research has highlighted the dynamic nature of drinking during the teenage years and young adulthood, the strong association between age and drinking style, the significant changes in drinking style that happen in relatively short periods of time as young people take on the responsibilities of adulthood (Percy et al., 2011; Seaman and Ikegwuonu, 2011).

Furthermore, we know now from survey data that a sizeable minority of young people in Great Britain abstain or drink lightly but this is often overlooked in the discourse around

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<sup>1</sup> There is no consensus definition of ‘binge’ drinking. It is a term that has been used in a variety of ways, often quite loosely, particularly in the media and the usefulness of the term has been called into question (Herring et al., 2008; Szmigin et al., 2008). In the major UK surveys binge drinking is defined as drinking over 6 units for women and over 8 units for men in one sitting. A unit is 10ml or 8g of pure alcohol.

young people and alcohol. In Great Britain in 2010, 20 per cent of men and 22 per cent of women aged 16-24 were non-drinkers, while 11 per cent of this age group (men and women) drank under one unit (a unit is 10ml or 8g of pure alcohol) a week (NHS Information Centre for Health and Social Care, 2012) – that is the equivalent of about half a pint of ordinary strength beer (3-4% alcohol by volume). Data from the 2010 General Lifestyle Survey indicates that 52 per cent of men aged 16-24 had not drunk alcohol in the previous week, a rise on 44 per cent found in the 2009 data and that 54 per cent of women aged 16-24 had not drunk in the previous week a rise on the 49 percent found in the 2009 data (NHS Information Centre for Health and Social Care, 2012).

Other survey data shows an upward trend since 2003 in the number of teenagers in England choosing not to drink alcohol: in 2003 39 per cent of pupils aged 11-15 had never had a drink, by 2009 this was 49 per cent and in 2010 this had risen to 56 per cent (Fuller, 2011). Similarly, the Health Behaviours in School-Aged Children Study (HBSC) 2009/10 found that in England far fewer pupils (aged 11, 13 and 15) reported that they drank at least once a week in comparison to 2005/06 (last time survey conducted); in 2005/06 38 per cent of girls and 41 per cent of boys aged reported weekly drinking, in 2009/10 the figures were 22 and 31 per cent respectively. Drunkenness (at least twice during their lifetime) amongst 15 year olds has also declined from 50 per cent for girls and 44 per cent for boys in 2005/06 to 43 per cent for girls and 38 per cent for boys in 2009/10. (Currie et al., 2008; Currie et al., 2012).

Qualitative studies have highlighted a variety of reasons for not drinking including sporting ambitions, religious and/or cultural prohibitions, family history of alcohol misuse, or simply not liking the effects of alcohol (Nairn et al., 2006; Bradby, 2007; Piacentini and Banister, 2009). Drinking among young people is primarily a sociable leisure activity and alcohol appears to play a significant and symbolic role in how it shapes social relations and social identity (Roche et al., 2008; Griffin et al., 2009; Seaman and Ikegwuonu, 2010). In a study of university students “stupid” drinking practices (e.g. group drinking games) were routes into belonging to social networks; conversely, such drinking practices could be a source of social exclusion or marginality for those who chose not to join in (Griffin et al., 2009). Research has found that non-drinkers often have to justify their behaviour among drinking peers (Nairn et al., 2006; Piacentini and Banister, 2009; Seaman and Ikegwuonu, 2010), whilst others would pass themselves off as drinkers and blend into the crowd (Nairn et al., 2006). In Piacentini and Banister’s study (2009), students identified themselves as ‘anti-consumers’ and as ‘not drinking alcohol’, whilst some did not consume any alcohol, others drank lightly or occasionally, but they all perceived themselves as operating outside the norms of consumption. The non-drinkers in Seaman and Ikegwuonu’s (2010) study appeared to gain a sense of pride from their resistance to cultural and group norms and also displayed a high degree of individuality. However, Griffin et al., (2009) argue that whilst some students successfully resisted what they saw as the ‘compulsory’ nature of drinking to intoxication, this position of non-conformity was not without it drawbacks as it led them to feel pushed to the margins of friendship groups. These earlier studies raise questions about how young non-drinkers negotiate their friendships and social identities within a youth culture where drinking is the social norm and also how might young people be encouraged to adopt social identities which do not embrace excessive consumption.

## **Methods**

This was a qualitative study of young women and men (aged 16-25) who drink little or no alcohol which explored their perceptions and reasons for not drinking or drinking lightly; the

influences that led to their drinking preferences, how they experience and negotiate not drinking and how their drinking preference impacts on their lives. More broadly, we sought to explore the effects of family and peers on drinking patterns and also how working, studying in further education and leisure time may influence, or be influenced by, young people's drinking choices.

Ethical approval for the research was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the researchers' university. Participants aged 16-25 years were recruited using a variety of approaches, including: notices on websites, posters, word of mouth, personal contacts, groups and events (e.g. student events, youth projects). The researchers explained to potential participants that the research study was looking at how young people spend their leisure time, and why some young people do not drink or drink very little. As part of the recruitment process potential participants completed a brief screening questionnaire and those who drank weekly or more often or said that they drank more than 2 drinks (women) or 3 drinks (men) on a usual drinking occasion or had been drunk within the last 2 months were excluded from the study<sup>2</sup>, Young people who gave religion as their primary reason for not drinking, were also excluded from the study to enable us to look beyond religious faith and explore more fully the different reasons that young people chose not to drink or drink little alcohol<sup>3</sup>.

A semi-structured interview schedule was used to elicit information about the respondent's current drinking within the context of their lives more broadly (i.e. leisure activities, friendships, family, relationships, work and study, past drinking behaviour and experiences) and also to explore the impact (if any) on their lives of their decision to drink lightly or not at all. Role play scenarios, vignettes and timelines were used within the interview to aid exploration of key issues e.g. reasons for drinking lightly/not all, how an individual manages pressures on them to drink, changes in their drinking behaviour over time. The interviews were arranged at the convenience of the participants, the vast majority (35) of the interviews were carried out one-to-one, six pairs of respondents were interviewed and one small group discussion was conducted. All respondents received a £10 shop voucher as a token of appreciation.

Written consent was obtained from all participants and with permission interviews/group discussions were recorded and verbatim transcripts produced. Participants were assured that all data would be treated in confidence and that no individuals would be identified in any research outputs. The data was collected and analysed by the authors and the NVivo8 software package was used to assist in data management and analysis of interview data. Verbatim transcripts were coded and thematic content analysis used to identify key themes. The researchers discussed emergent themes and categories at each stage of the process and a third of interviews were double coded to ensure consistency.

### **Sample**

Research participants comprised a diverse group of 52 young people (26 women and 26 men), aged between 16-25 years who drank little or no alcohol. The majority (46) were students, studying at schools, Further Education colleges and universities, with many of them working

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<sup>2</sup> Current UK guidelines are that men should not regularly drink more than 3/4 units a day and women 2/3 units a day. Regularly means drinking this amount most days or every day.

<sup>3</sup> Some religions (e.g. Seventh-Day Adventist Church, Islam) forbid, discourage or restrict the consumption of alcohol and so, as part of their faith, followers abstain from alcohol. The funders (Joseph Rowntree Foundation) felt there was a particular gap in the understanding of young people who drink little/not at all for reasons other than religion which required attention.

part time and a few had previous experience of full-time employment prior to their current studies. Four respondents were in full time employment and two were unemployed. The vast majority of respondents were living in London at the time of the interview: London is ethnically diverse, with 32 per cent of the population being Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic in 2006 (GLA, 2010) and this was reflected in our sample, (see Table 1 for a summary).

**TABLE 1 (Ethnicity of respondents) ABOUT HERE**

## **Results**

### ***Young people's current drinking patterns and attitudes***

The sample included 22 people who currently do not drink alcohol (nine young women and 13 young men) and 30 current light drinkers<sup>4</sup> (17 young women and 13 young men). Following analysis of the interview data, five drinking types were identified (Table 2). The drinking types encapsulate young people's drinking habits in terms of both their current and their previous use. There were 13 young people who had never drunk a whole alcoholic drink, although most had tried sips of drinks and these were categorised as non drinkers. For many young people their current drinking (or non-drinking) represents a shift over time, with some having drunk more in the past: of the 22 non-drinkers nine used to be drinkers, and five of the light drinkers had been heavy drinkers. Although 11 of the light drinkers had never been drunk, 14 of the light drinkers had had at least one episode of drunkenness in the past. Experimentation with cigarettes and drugs was not common within the sample but was discussed by some respondents, mostly former drinkers or those who had been drunk.

**Table 2 (Drinking types) ABOUT HERE**

With regards to their current drinking, young people during the interviews reported either not drinking at all or drinking small amounts infrequently.

We're in March now so it must have been January when it was someone's leavers do. Before that it would have been September when we went on holiday, that's gaps ... New Year's I had one drink.

(Young woman – light drinker)

For some drinking was closely linked to special occasions:

Occasional probably is the best word for it. Like I say I don't know why but it tends to be big events like birthdays and you have a glass of wine at Christmas, on Christmas Day with your big roast dinner and everything and maybe like my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, because it was a big one, I had a glass of champagne and a glass of wine and stuff like that and it was nice. But I just can't stand to drink for no reason, it just seems a pointless waste of time to me.

(Young man – light drinker)

The majority of young people in the sample did not see drinking alcohol as a bad thing *per se* and were not anti-alcohol. Most young people stressed that they see drinking alcohol as a

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<sup>4</sup>Those consuming alcohol less than once a week, drinking no more than 2 drinks (women) and 3 drinks (men) on each drinking occasion and had not been drunk for at least 3 months.

personal, and not a moral choice. Several of the non-drinkers considered that although they believed that alcohol is not right for them, it does not follow that alcohol is not right for others. It was recognised that it may be a moral choice for people who do not drink because it is proscribed by their religion, but aside from religious grounds choosing to drink or not was not deemed a moral matter.

The prevailing view was that drinking in moderation is okay, but that it is important for people to know their limits. Participants emphasised that drinking needs to be ‘responsible’ and ‘reasonable’. However, they varied in their definition of ‘responsible’ and ‘reasonable’, with some young people thinking alcohol is appropriate only for special occasions a few times a year, with others arguing that drinking is okay as long as people are not doing themselves any harm. The need for people to recognise their limits when drinking was sometimes expressed in terms of behavioural limits, such as not acting very drunk and losing control, and at other times referred to consumption over longer periods of time and the need to avoid what they loosely termed ‘addiction’ and denoting some form of dependency. Both of these were pertinent for young people, though non-drinkers were more likely to emphasise the need to limit consumption to avoid health risks. Drinking just for the sake of drinking was often criticised, with wine taken with a meal often cited as an example of acceptable drinking.

Among a small number of young people in the sample was a more extreme view that drinking alcohol is in general a bad thing. These opinions were most common among non-drinkers, and some former drinkers. Implicit in some non-drinkers’ opinions of alcohol was a ‘slippery slope’ view of drinking, wherein they believed that drinking alcohol will most likely end in ‘addiction’, and it is therefore better not to start:

But people will keep on arguing like, like if you have control on your drinking then it is okay. But I think once you have started there is no control... Once you start drinking then eventually you will start losing your control.

(Young man – non drinker)

Thus, whilst there was a diverse range of attitudes and beliefs amongst the young people, the prevailing view was that drinking alcohol is a personal choice and acceptable in moderation.

### **Becoming a non-or light drinker**

In order to understand how young people arrived at their current drinking attitudes and behaviours it is necessary to consider the range of influences and experiences they described, particularly as they were growing up. These were captured in young people’s ‘narratives’; the stories and recollections that they related during interviews to help explain their current attitudes and behaviours. From the data three narratives could be identified which encapsulate these journeys:

- One type of narrative can be described as ‘**consistent**’ insofar as young people fitting this category have been consistent in the decisions they have made regarding alcohol use over their lifespan. Although in these cases there are again many influences that help to explain why young people do not drink or drink lightly, these influences often seem to reinforce existing attitudes and beliefs about drinking. Young people who have been consistent in their views about alcohol are non-drinkers and light drinkers who have never been drunk.

- A second type of narrative is described as **‘transitional’**; these tend to involve shifts and fluctuations in drinking over time eventually leading to a reduction in consumption. In cases like these, it is difficult to pinpoint a specific experience or belief about alcohol that explains changes in drinking, or a particular moment in time when change occurred. A large number of these young people formed their decisions in part through their personal experiences of drinking. Fluctuations in how these young people drink are still sometimes evident and they may still occasionally get drunk or have more to drink than they planned.
- The third type of narrative involves an identifiable **‘turning point’** during a young person’s life that leads to a change in behaviour and/or a change in attitude towards alcohol. This was frequently observed in young people who were former heavy drinkers, or had a particularly negative experience with alcohol that put them off drinking. It was also noticeable, however, for two young people who had always been non-drinkers, who made a conscious deliberate decision to not drink at a young age. ‘Turning points’ were commonly triggered by, a drunken experience, health concerns or religion.

A total of 16 young people described a narrative featuring a turning point, 17 reported transitional narratives, and 19 revealed consistent decisions and attitudes towards alcohol over their lifetimes. The relationship between the different drinking types and narratives is illustrated in the diagram below.

### **FIGURE 1 (Young people’s drinking types and narratives) ABOUT HERE**

Much overlap is evident in the three narratives that are identifiable in young people’s accounts and the following sections highlight the broader social and cultural context in which young people make their decisions and manage being a non-drinker or drinking lightly.

#### **‘Real life’ influences and observations: family, friends and beyond**

For young people choosing not to drink or drink lightly was a positive choice they made for varied reasons with the strongest messages and influences coming from real life observations. They include good parental models but for some may involve seeing the negative or harmful effects of alcohol on others including friends and family; not liking the taste of alcohol; the high cost; drinking not fitting in with their other commitments (e.g. sporting, academic) and, for some, their own negative past experiences with drinking, for example after getting drunk. The family is felt by most young people to be important for setting boundaries around appropriate drinking behaviours, and many felt that parents and family members had provided them with positive role models in ‘how to drink’:

The way they handle it is very good, especially if me or my younger brother are around they’ll make sure that they don’t have anywhere near as much to get them tipsy or drunk. They will make sure they have one glass of wine to relax, to enjoy and that’s it.

(Young man – light drinker)



In many cases their first experiences of alcohol were supervised, generally at family meals or special occasions and often actively encouraged by parents, despite some young people persistently objecting to its taste.

For most young people, parents provide good role models of sensible drinking, however, some experienced the negative consequences of parents or other close relatives drinking through disruptions to their family life and family relationships. As one young woman explained:

They're (her parents) arguing and screaming at each other upstairs and they come down and they're moody ..... they're just miserable with each other. But then the next day they're fine and they're happy and I just don't, I don't want to do that with my boyfriend, I don't want to fall into that trap, so I generally just kind of stay away from it (alcohol).

(Young woman – light drinker)

Others learnt about alcohol's potentially negative effects from witnessing their neighbours and community members with alcohol problems suffering from personal harm and damaged social reputations. Such early 'real life' observations left a strong impression:

So like after seeing the influence on the area, I didn't need my mum and dad to sit down and be like okay these are the effects of alcohol, blah, blah, you'd just see it and it's like 'Mum why is this person like this?'; 'Because he's had too much alcohol' and you were like 'okay'. You don't need to ask any more questions about that because you just know if you drink alcohol ... then you end up like this. And so you kind of think okay so I'm not going to drink alcohol ... If you see it in a person it sticks in your mind more than someone telling you.

(Young woman – light drinker)

Seeing friends and peers drink to excess, which the majority of young people experienced at some point, served to reinforce the decisions of many non – and light drinkers to stop drinking heavily or quit completely. One non-drinker explained the behaviour he saw in his friends:

I couldn't really understand why they would want to be out of control of their own selves, because that is what I saw is that they lost their inhibitions and their ability to make rational judgements, you know careful decisions in their physical relationships and things like that with other people. The fact that they couldn't get through a door and things like that because they'd walk into the side of the door – why would you want to do that, I don't know. I don't see that as fun.

(Young man – non-drinker)

The majority of the light and former drinkers had drunk alcohol with friends during their teenage years and most of the former drinkers went through long periods when they drank heavily, often with friends, before deciding to stop. Young people described drinking because that was what other people were doing and they wanted to 'fit in'. The former drinkers reported initially enjoying drinking, describing it as 'fun' and 'exciting' and that it made them feel more confident and sociable:

'I used to, more or less just drink for the sake of being drunk and I can't say I didn't enjoy it'.

(Young woman – former drinker)

However, many had negative experiences (e.g. making poor judgements) that influenced their decision to stop drinking:

I really didn't get much from it, I just felt I was intoxicated, I didn't know where I was, I didn't know what I was doing, I couldn't control my actions.

(Young man – former drinker)

For some former drinkers there was a distinct 'turning point', which was frequently linked to health, religion or experiences of drunkenness, whilst for others, it was a more gradual process of transition. In most cases, former heavy drinkers ceased to drink at all, and argued that they were better off with their decision.

### **Being a non- or light drinker**

Although British survey data suggests that it is commonplace for young people to choose not to drink alcohol or to drink very little, it is still perceived as being outside the 'norm'. Respondents felt there was a widespread assumption that drinking heavily was part of 'growing up', and which they came across amongst parents/family, friends, peers, in schools and within the media:

People said these things are normal and everybody is doing it and you'll be like out of society now.

(Young man – former drinker)

All teachers were telling us okay don't drink this much because this and this happens, but no one told me that it's okay to not drink. So I think that could be a very important part for example in high school and at that age to hear that it's okay not to be part of the rest of ...

(Young woman – non drinker)

Young people were angered by the lack of support -for their choice and wanted their personal preferences to be respected and recognised as a valid choice.

Whilst for some young people choosing not to drink or drink lightly was central to their identity, for others it was 'no big deal'; rather it is just one among many choices they made about their lives. Similarly, some participants placed great value on being different and not following the 'crowd', whilst for others this was not a consideration. Like the respondents in Seaman and Ikegwonu's (2010) study, this respondent was proud of being 'different':

I'd say it's an important part of who I am because it's always something that I would say I feel slightly, it may be an arrogant thing to say, but I feel slightly proud of not drinking in the face of the fact that I've always been pressured to drink by other people"

(Young man –non-drinker)

Many actively pursued interests and hobbies that did not involve being part of drinking cultures (e.g. photography, dance, sport) or where alcohol was not a focus; indeed heavy

drinking would often impede their activities e.g. taking part in competitive sport. Young people placed a strong emphasis on responsibilities connected to work and study, with their attitudes towards drinking and studying contrasting strongly with the popular stereotype of student drinking:

I've got studies and I know how much a hangover affects me and I don't enjoy it for one and I know I'm not going to get any work done the next day.

(Young man – light drinker)

In terms of their social lives, young people often encouraged their drinking friends to participate in activities that did not involve alcohol or where alcohol was *incidental* rather than *integral* to the event, e.g. to see a film, visit an exhibition. They felt it was too easy for drinkers to 'default' to simply going out drinking and not to consider alternatives.

I'd say the offers that I get from friends to go out, you know 90% of them are all, let's just go out and drink, and do what, and yeah, let's just go out, it's like no, go out and do something, go out and see a play and have a drink, let's go out and see a film but not just go out and drink for drinking's sake.

(Young woman - light drinker)

University students highlighted the strong emphasis on activities involving drinking and getting drunk, with scant attention paid to organising events or socials that do not have alcohol at their core. However, they did give examples of successful, well attended alcohol-free events e.g. tea parties, or where the focus is not on alcohol e.g. quiz nights, and felt that more effort should go into putting on and promoting such events.

Whilst some participants actively avoided drinking environments (i.e. bars, house parties), others were content to spend time in such environments, although they often placed limits (e.g. arrive later, leave early). Participants differentiated between types of drinking situations, feeling more comfortable in ones where they perceived that the focus was not solely on drinking, which varied between individuals. For example, some were happy to go to a restaurant but not bars or clubs, others went to clubs for the music and to dance but not bars, where as one woman said "you just sit down drinking".

Young people developed their own responses and strategies for managing not drinking within drinking situations. These included a firm but polite 'no thank you' to offers of drinks, 'mirroring' drinks so that people thought they were drinking alcohol, buying their own drinks, disposing of unwanted drinks or having a 'legitimate excuse' such as driving. Light drinkers reported 'nursing' their drinks to make them last longer, avoided buying in 'rounds' and going only for short time to events where the focus was on drinking (i.e. arrive late or leave early). The approach taken depended on the context (e.g. whether with old friends, in a new social situation etc), and also reflected the extent to which young people were 'open' about their drinking behaviour, which varied considerably, with some striving to 'blend in' and not reveal their 'secret' and others being 'up front' about their drinking preferences. Some talked about the value of 'walk away power':

(If pressured to drink) I just say no and if they carried on, I'd just generally walk away, not in a rude way, but just like oh I'm going to the toilet now or something like that.

(Young woman – light drinker)

If they are getting particularly irritatingly drunk, which is rare I would say..., London is easy enough just to move yourself out of that situation and get home or go and do something else...Even when I was younger I would always give myself that kind of walk away power in case things get, I don't want to be responsible for others or what have you.

(Young man – non-drinker)

The last quote raises another key issue about the roles non-drinking (or more sober) young people can find themselves taking on i.e. being the designated driver, caring etc. In drinking situations young people often found themselves taking on a caring role - 'being mum' -for those who had drunk too much. They often did this somewhat reluctantly, placing boundaries on what they would do (i.e. put friends in a taxi rather than take them home) and differentiating between close friends and acquaintances (i.e. will look after if a friend) and several refused to take on such roles.

...that is the only thing that I get cross about being the only like sober person quite often is that you are always the one looking after everyone else.

(Young woman – light drinker)

I just think it should fall to the person who's the most competent to look after...make sure everyone's, not mollycoddle them but at least make sure they all get in a taxi home or something like that. Make sure they are all safe, if not completely happy:

(Young woman –light drinker)

One young woman, vividly described an all night event, where she found herself 'babysitting' a younger woman, her account encapsulating the frustrations expressed by some young people:

It's like I'm not your mum okay, I technically should not be responsible for you whatsoever, what you choose to do, you're 18, you're an adult as far as I am concerned so you can choose to do whatever you want, but because I know you and I know how vulnerable you are, I have to take that role. I can't watch people, I hate watching people just deteriorate in front of me...

(Young woman – light drinker)

On the one hand, they were irritated at having to deal with the negative consequences of other people's (adults') decisions (i.e. to drink heavily) and what they regarded as a lack of personal responsibility; on the other hand they felt morally obliged to help if they thought someone was vulnerable (e.g. to injury, sexual assault etc).

## **Discussion**

Within this study young people challenge and are critical of what they see as distorted and negative stereotyping of young people that portrays them all as heavy 'binge' drinkers. Drinking and getting drunk is not an automatic rite of passage for young people in the UK, rather, our findings reflect recent survey data that indicates that it is increasingly commonplace for young people to choose not to drink or drink lightly. Discourses around young people who do not drink or drink little often were found to revolve around portrayals of these young people as socially isolated and dull. Yet the young people we spoke to did not fall into easy stereotypes; their lives were busy and varied. Indeed, some argued that it was

drinkers that were ‘boring’ as they ‘defaulted’ to drinking on social occasions thus limiting their social horizons and experiences. As alcohol does not feature in our respondents lives they tended to prefer activities where drinking rarely plays a role. Although some young people avoided drinking situations, many were content to socialise in drinking environments, adopting a number of strategies to enable them to do so. Unlike earlier studies (e.g. Griffin et al., 2009), young people in this study did not report feeling marginalised by their drinking decisions; building a social life away from alcohol, coupled with a pro-active approach to managing drinking situations enabled them to be socially integrated. What came through the interviews was a quiet determination and, for some, a pride in their resistance to the predominant drinking culture.

Studies of drinkers have highlighted that it is common to have a designated ‘non-drinker’ (often just drinking *less* rather than nothing) on a night out who is charged with ensuring the safety and well being of the drinkers (e.g. Griffin et al., 2009; Seaman and Ikegwuonu, 2010 ). Whilst the benefits for drinkers are manifest, this practice is rarely considered from the perspective of the non-drinker. With one notable exception, respondents within this study took on caring roles somewhat reluctantly and placed limits on the role linked with the strength of the social tie. They resented the common assumption that they would be ‘mum’, arguing that it took away from their enjoyment of an evening and that it was unreasonable to expect them to be responsible for adults who had chosen to drink heavily. One young man took a very different approach, embracing the caring role in relation to a group of his close friends, a role he appeared to relish and from which he gained satisfaction.

There is currently a widespread assumption that drinking alcohol is an integral part of growing up for young people, reinforced by alcohol education messages promoted in schools and by health educators, media portrayals and by some parents. One of the guiding principles of the World Health Organisation’s *Global Alcohol Strategy* (WHO, 2010) is that children, teenagers and adults who choose not to drink alcohol have the right to be supported in their non-drinking behaviour and protected from pressures to drink. At all levels of policy making and across all areas of practice (health, education etc), policy makers and practitioners need to represent and promote the diversity of young people choosing not to drink or drink lightly to help address existing stereotypes and support those young people who opt not to drink, drink lightly and those who would like to drink less. Alcohol education and advice aimed at young people and at their parents should include information on strategies used successfully by young people themselves.

Furthermore, there is a need to develop more activities and opportunities for young people to socialise without alcohol or where it is not the focus of the event. Further and higher education institutions can play a part in providing such opportunities and also by ensuring that bars stock a wide array of soft drinks which are attractively priced and actively promoted. Such steps would help support individuals who choose not to drink and foster a culture where heavy drinking is not seen as essential to a ‘good night out’. However, for such changes to be effective they would need to be replicated more widely and be part of a broader cultural shift. Population-wide strategies therefore need to be developed to help shift social and cultural attitudes and perceptions more generally.

By focusing on ‘binge’ drinking by young people and its associated harms, research may have acted to reinforce the assumption that all young people drink in a potentially problematic way. There is a need to redress the current imbalance and to widen the drinking discourse beyond misuse and drunkenness and its effects. Those who commission and

conduct research have a part to play in redressing the balance by exploring and understanding all aspects of consumption, including the consumption patterns of those who do not drink or choose to drink within recommended limits. This exploratory study provides a platform for further work and there is plenty of scope for comparative studies across different countries and cultures.

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